

Washington, DC - Following up on a request by Rep. Peter Welch last winter, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) has issued two reports on the quality of veterans care.

The reports come just days before Monday's anniversary of *The Washington Post* exposé on substandard care at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

In the wake of the revelations at Walter Reed, on March 1 Welch enlisted 42 members of the freshman class in the new Congress to join him in calling for an independent assessment by the GAO of "the adequacy of the Administration's long term plans to provide the full range of necessary services for veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars while continuing to care for veterans of previous wars."

"If there was one thing we learned from the disgraceful conditions at Walter Reed, it was that the new Congress needed to be an aggressive watchdog for our veterans to assure they get the care they deserve. Supporting our troops does not stop at the edge of the battlefield," said Welch, who was first to request congressional hearings at Walter Reed.

The first report finds that National Guard and Reserve service members returning from deployment have reported post-deployment mental health concerns at a higher rate than their active duty counterparts. It also analyzes the Post-Deployment Health Reassessment (PDHRA) Program for returning National Guard and Reserve, including the transition of care between the Department of Defense and VA.

The second report assesses the Veteran's Administration's response to Traumatic Brain Injury, the signature wound of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Among service members treated at Walter Reed, approximately 65 percent have some level of TBI.

"We know there is an alarmingly high rate of Traumatic Brain Injury among returning service members. Soldiers need to receive timely and aggressive screening and treatment so they can return to healthy and productive lives as soon as possible," added Welch.

The GAO found that the VA is now screening all veterans for mild TBI and has fully implemented a new computer-based screening tool. However, because the screening tool has not been fully evaluated, it is unknown whether it is accurately capturing all veterans with mild TBI. The study also detailed the challenges of evaluating and treating TBI, concluding that the VA must continue to monitor and improve their systems for screening, evaluating, and treating TBI.

Welch requested the original GAO report on March 1, 2007 and the GAO agreed to conduct the investigation as part of a series of veterans care studies on March 27. The reports are two of five investigations by the GAO to assess the overall quality of veterans care.

The GAO is the independent non-partisan watchdog of federal spending.

The summary and full National Guard report can be viewed at: <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d08181r.pdf>

The summary and full TBI report can be viewed at: <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d08276.pdf>